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ABSTRACT

This document, part of the lesson plan series, "Teaching with Historic Places," examines Spanish influences on the history of California through an exploration of one building, Rancho Los Alamitos. Located in the midst of what is now metropolitan Los Angeles, Rancho Los Alamitos began as a simple adobe house on a hill overlooking thousands of acres. Following introductory material the document sets out student objectives and teaching activities. Among the instructional suggestions are sections on "Setting the Stage"; "Locating the Site"; "Determining the Facts"; and "Putting It All Together." The lesson plan includes two map exhibits, five floor plans of the structure, one illustration, two readings, and 10 photographs. (SG)

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Californio to American:

A Study in Cultural Change

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Teaching with Historic Places

A program of the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places and the National Trust for Historic Preservation

Californio to American: A Study in Cultural Change

BY PETER CHEOROS

Surrounded today by all the bustle of a great metropolitan area, Rancho Los Alamitos (Ranch of the Little Cottonwoods) began as a simple adobe house on a small hill overlooking thousands of acres of open space. The land, with its natural spring, was once the site of a Pubuna Indian village. Later, *Californios*, Spanish settlers in what is now the state of California, erected several small adobe dwellings in the midst of their cattle ranges. Successive owners made changes to one of these adobes until it was transformed into an elegant 18-room ranch house. Today, Rancho Los Alamitos provides a tangible example of the physical and cultural change that took place in the region from the Spanish colonial days through the Mexican territorial era to the modern American period.

In this lesson particular attention is paid to how changes in architecture reflected increasing accommodation to American culture. The lesson is based on the National Register of Historic Places registration form for Rancho Los Alamitos. Materials for students include (1) readings drawn from the registration form and other sources, (2) maps of the property and surrounding area and photographs of the various buildings on the site, and (3) floor plans of the ranch house depicting changes and additions made over nearly two centuries. This lesson could be used in teaching units on the history of the westward movement or on the multicultural nature of American society. Students will learn how Americans modified the Californio building style, at the same time adopting aspects of that style and way of life and making it their own. They will practice analytic skills as they work with readings, photographs, schematic drawings, and maps.

Rancho Los Alamitos

Objectives for the Students

- To describe the history of California prior to 1848 and its early Californio culture.
- To relate how the Californios were changed by the coming of the Americans.
- To analyze and evaluate documents and schematic plans that describe Californio architecture.
- To explain how the architecture of buildings can reflect basic changes in the way people live.
- To investigate actual properties in the students' own community listed in or potentially eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Teaching Activities

Setting the Stage

Start the lesson by reviewing with students the early history of California. The first European contact came in 1542 when Juan Cabrillo was sent from the newly conquered Spanish province of Mexico to search for gold. He sailed along the coast of Alta California and prepared the first written description of the region. Because Cabrillo's exploration party failed to find gold, the Spanish more or less ignored the region for the next two centuries. It was not until 1769 that

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the first permanent European settlers arrived, led by Gaspar de Portola and Father Junipero Serra. In the next decade a few *presidios*, or military forts, were established along the coast at San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Monterey. In 1781 the *pueblo*, or town, of Los Angeles was created. Most of the Spanish settlers did not move into these tiny villages, but instead established themselves on *ranchos*, or ranches, where they soon developed a distinct Californio culture centered around cattle-raising. To stimulate colonization, the Spanish, and later the Mexican, government gave away huge land grants. During the Spanish period these were normally given to retired soldiers such as Manuelo Nieto, who was granted 156,000 acres with which he began Rancho Los Alamitos.

In 1821, after the Mexican government took control of California, the number of land grants increased. Some even were given to foreigners—mostly Americans—who were willing to become Mexican citizens. Many Californios had little use for Mexico and engaged in sporadic revolts during the 1830s and 1840s. Then came the Mexican-American War and the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Under this agreement, Mexico ceded huge tracts of land in the Southwest to the United States. Called the Mexican Cession, these territories together constituted the largest single land acquisition by the United States since the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Although the rancho system was maintained, within 20 years control of most ranches had passed into the hands of Americans—by purchase, force, or fraud.

Mass migrations caused by the 1848 discovery of gold in the northern part of the territory quickly submerged the local Californio culture, but in the southern region, change came more slowly. The few Americans who had settled in Southern California prior to its transfer to the United States to some extent had attempted to integrate themselves into the local culture. Frequently, they had married into prominent Californio families, learned at least rudimentary Spanish, and converted to the Roman Catholic religion. Eventually, however, the press of the growing population of non-Hispanos and economic changes destroyed an old way of life.

Locating the Site

Provide the students with copies of the attached maps and Photo 1 to complete the following exercises:

a. Have the students locate California on a map of the United States. Point out that Alta, or upper, California stretched from San Diego in the south to San Francisco in the north. From San Diego south, the region was known as Baja, or lower, California. The peninsula south of what is today the state of California is the only section still known as Baja California and is part of Mexico.

b. Have the students locate the main Spanish/Mexican settlements of San Diego, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Monterey, San Jose, and San Francisco. Ask the students what these locations have in common. The reason these sites were chosen is that sea travel was the fastest means of transportation to California until after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. This sea contact was especially important when these villages were remote outposts of a far-flung empire. Have the students note that the land routes to California from Mexico pass through desert or semi-desert. Explain how physical isolation can quickly lead to the development of a distinctive culture. Most maps of the region should show the city of Long Beach where Rancho Los Alamitos is located. Long Beach did not become a city until the 1880s, and even then much of Rancho Los Alamitos remained a separate entity. Most of its land was not subdivided until the 1950s.

c. Ask the students to examine Map Exhibit 1, a current map with an overlay showing how the original land grant was divided among the heirs of Manuel Nieto in 1834. Juan Jose Nieto was awarded Rancho Los Alamitos, which contained over 26,000 acres. Now have the students examine Photo 1, an aerial shot of Los Alamitos as it appeared in 1936. Ask them to note not only the open spaces around the ranch buildings, but also how the city of Long Beach is beginning to encroach on the site of the ranch.

d. Have the students study Map Exhibit 2, a U.S. Geological Survey map of the section of Long Beach where Rancho Los Alamitos is located. Have them find Bixby Ranch, the modern name for Rancho Los Alamitos, and point out that the original ranch has been reduced to a bit more than seven acres. Ask the students to describe the immediate neighborhood of the ranch (houses surround the property, but there is an enclave of spacious grounds nearby because of the colleges, schools, and U.S. veterans hospital). Then have the students describe the larger region (freeways, trailer parks, subdivisions, etc.). Ask them to imagine that all structures have been removed except for the buildings of Rancho Los Alamitos. Have the students re-examine Map Exhibit 1 and consider how different the region was when all the land was used for ranching operations.

Determining the Facts

Reading 1: The History of Rancho Los Alamitos

Over its nearly 200-year history, Rancho Los Alamitos has had many owners, each of whom contributed to the development of Southern California. Provide the students with copies of Reading 1. Ask them to answer the following questions after they have completed the reading:

a. Why might the king of Spain have felt free to "give" large tracts of land in California to his subjects?

b. Why was Abel Stearns considered typical of early American settlers in California?

c. How did Michael Reese make his fortune?

d. What aspects of the rancho as it was described in 1915 especially appeal to you?

e. Why do you think the Bixby heirs would give Rancho Los Alamitos to the city of Long Beach?

Reading 2: The Construction of Rancho Los Alamitos

One of the most interesting aspects of Rancho Los Alamitos is the way in which the original adobe building was altered into one that reflects the change from a Californio culture to an American culture. Provide the students with copies of Reading 2. Have them complete the reading and answer the following questions:

a. Why were adobe buildings made with such thick walls? How does this construction reflect adaptation to the environment?

b. Why might it have been important to build the various additions to Rancho Los Alamitos?

c. In what ways were the construction methods different for each phase?

d. If the new additions did not have the advantages of adobe construction, why were they built so differently?

e. How do these new construction methods reflect changes in the culture?

Visual Evidence

Provide the students with copies of Plans 1–5 and Illustration 1 to complete the following exercises:

Have the students refer back to Reading 2 as they study the evolution of the original adobe into the Bixby ranch house. As they examine each of the five floor plans of Rancho Los Alamitos, give them a brief explanation of each phase of construction and ask the questions listed.

Plan 1. The original adobe was built sometime between 1800 and the 1840s. During the Mexican period, the adobe was a common and highly utilitarian structure.

a. Why do you think there were only four rooms?

b. Where do you suppose the family spent most of their time?

c. Where do you think the kitchen was located?

d. What do the features of the house tell you about the occupants' way of life?

Plan 2. This plan indicates the changes made by Abel Stearns shortly after California became a part of the United States. Point out that the walls in the new addition are considerably thinner than those of the original adobe.

a. What does the thickness of the walls tell you about the materials employed in their construction?

b. Why do you think there was a sudden change in construction methods?

c. How do the types of added rooms reflect a change in the living habits of the occupants?

d. Who do you think ate in the men's dining room? What might this indicate about the economic growth of the ranch?

Plan 3. This plan reflects several small additions made by the Bixbys. Note that the building materials used are similar to those employed in the second addition.

a. Despite the additions to the building, the function of two bedrooms in the adobe section of the house never changed. How would you account for this consistency of use compared with the other changes?

Plan 4. This plan shows the ranch house after 50 years of occupation by the Stearns and Bixby families. Compare this plan with the three previous plans.

a. How have the functions of some rooms changed? How have they remained the same?

b. Which of these changes might be the result of the increasing prosperity of the ranch?

c. Re-read the quote toward the end of Reading 1. How does this plan reflect the concepts of "improved and modernized"? Would you agree with that statement?

Plan 5. This plan shows the last of the changes made to the house by the Bixby family.

a. What indications do you have that the rancho continued to prosper?

b. Which changes do you think were made for the comfort of the family and which for utilitarian purposes?

c. Compare this plan with Illustration 1. Does the illustration help you to understand what it might have been like to live at Rancho Los Alamitos? How would the spacious grounds enhance that experience?

Now have the students more closely examine Illustration 1, the site plan of Rancho Los Alamitos. Explain that this is the way the ranch looked when the property was nominated for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. The parking area for 64 cars was built for visitors touring the site. The gardens were designed and planted in the 1920s and 1930s by Florence Bixby with the help of several Long Beach–area landscape architects. Ask the students to note the several outbuildings and to speculate on the nature of daily life at the property during the last years it was run as a ranch. (Most of these outbuildings were originally located farther away from the house. They were moved in closer so they could all stand on the seven preserved acres.) Students may wonder where the ranch hands lived. Explain that the original rancho had many additional buildings that have not been preserved.

Next, provide the students with copies of Photos 2–9. As they examine each photo, can they match it to the site plan and the floor plans? Can they picture daily life at a rancho such as this one? As students work with each of the photos, have them answer the questions that appear in the captions. Then have them prepare a description of the house and grounds that might be used to advertise the property. Have several students read their descriptions aloud while the class notes the attributes mentioned most frequently. Engage the students in a general discussion about why certain aspects of Los Alamitos were considered of such interest.

Putting It All Together

Briefly review what students have learned about the early history of Southern California and about the changes in the way of life brought about by the transfer of ownership from Mexico to the United States. To extend the lesson, have students participate in one or more of the following activities.

Activity 1: Determining National Register Eligibility

The nomination form documenting Rancho Los Alamitos for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) provides a brief history of the site, describes its significance, and presents an argument for designating it as a place of historical importance. Ask the students to discuss whether they agree that this rancho has enough historical importance to be included in the Register. They should select at least two of the areas of significance listed below that typically are applied by the NRHP in deciding whether or not inclusion in the Register is justified. The students should cite specific facts to support their conclusions and defend their selections. Note that some of the following areas may not be applicable or the evidence presented may be insufficient.

- Archeology Historic—Non-Aboriginal: archeological study of non-aboriginal cultures after the advent of written records.
- Architecture: the practical art of designing and constructing buildings to serve human needs.
- Economics: the study of the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth; the management of monetary and other assets.
- Ethnic Heritage—European: the history of persons having origins in Europe.
- Ethnic Heritage—Hispanic: the history of persons having origins in the Spanish-speaking areas of the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, and South America.
- Exploration/Settlement: the investigations of unknown or little-known regions; the establishment and earliest development of new settlements or communities.
- Industry: the technology and process of managing materials, labor, and equipment to produce goods and services.

Activity 2: Locating Significant Local Properties

Using the criteria found in Activity 1, have the students examine a property in their own community that is listed in the National Register or that students believe should be listed. Have them discuss which areas of significance they would use if they were preparing a nomination for that property, and how they would justify their decisions. Students and teachers who are interested in finding local properties or preparing a nomination for the Register should contact the NRHP (see p. 5) to obtain free copies of listings or copies of Bulletin 15, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation,* and Bulletin 16, *Guidelines for Completing National Register of Historic Places Forms.*

Activity 3: The Ranch House

Consulting the floor plans and photos provided earlier, have the students construct a model of the Rancho Los Alamitos, using cardboard if adobe is not practical. The students should be sure to make the walls of the original house thicker that those of the additions. Some may choose to draw their conception of what the house looked

like during the various stages of its construction. Either of these activities will help students visualize more clearly the changes that occurred in Rancho Los Alamitos from 1850 to the early 1900s.

Activity 4: Imagining Life at Rancho Los Alamitos

Have the students write journal or diary entries or short papers in which they imagine they are living in the ranch house during each of the first four stages of its construction. They should try to describe what daily life was like and how it changed. Encourage them to think about the problems of daily life each phase of construction attempted to solve. What were the advantages of the changes? What were the disadvantages? Another variation of this activity would be for students to role-play the same situations.

Visiting the Site

Rancho Los Alamitos Historic Ranch and Gardens is owned by the city of Long Beach and operated by the Rancho Los Alamitos Foundation. It is open to the public Wednesday through Sunday, 1–5 p.m. Admission is free. Located on Bixby Hill Road, the rancho can be reached by exiting the San Diego Freeway at Palo Verde Avenue. For more information, write Rancho Los Alamitos Historic Ranch and Gardens, 6400 Bixby Hill Road, Long Beach, California 90815.

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This is one in a series of lesson plans by the National Register of Historic Places and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The National Register is maintained by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, as a means of recognizing properties significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture. Each registration file contains a description of the property, an explanation of its historical importance, one or more photographs, one or more maps, and sometimes other documentation. The computerized National Register Information System (NRIS) can produce listings according to location, historical function, historical theme, and other categories. To obtain copies of registration documents or NRIS information, contact **Teaching with Historic Places**, *Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20013-7127, or phone (202) 343-9536. The National Trust and its 250,000 members support preservation organizations and programs in neighborhoods and communities throughout the United States where staff and volunteers are available to work with their schools. For more information on the National Trust's educational programs, please write Heritage Education, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036, or phone (202) 673-4040.*

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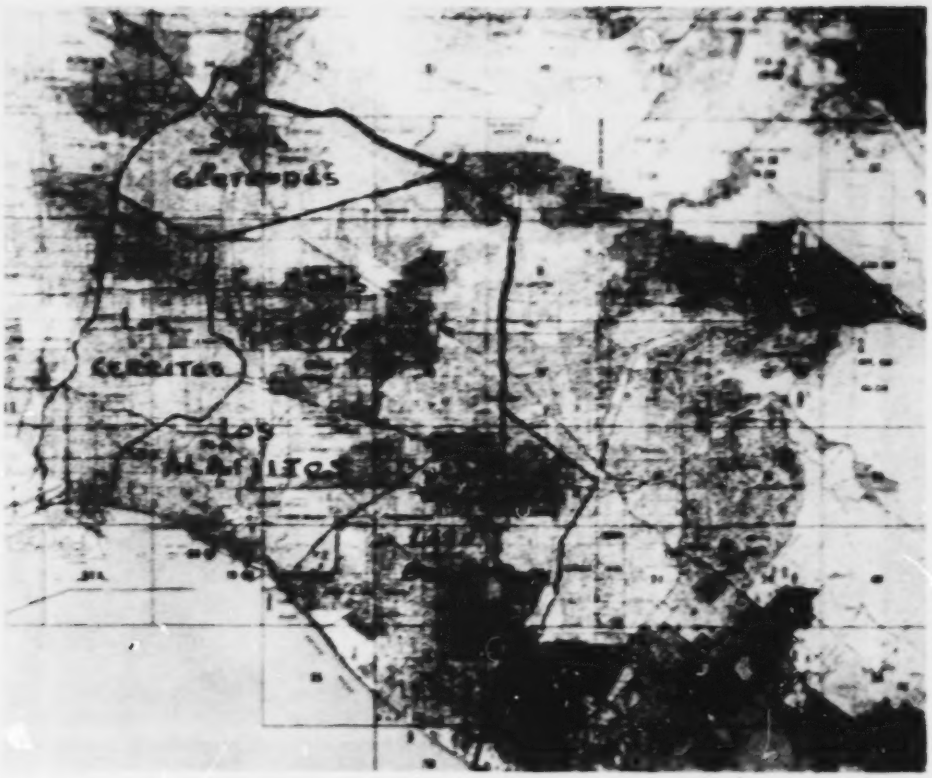
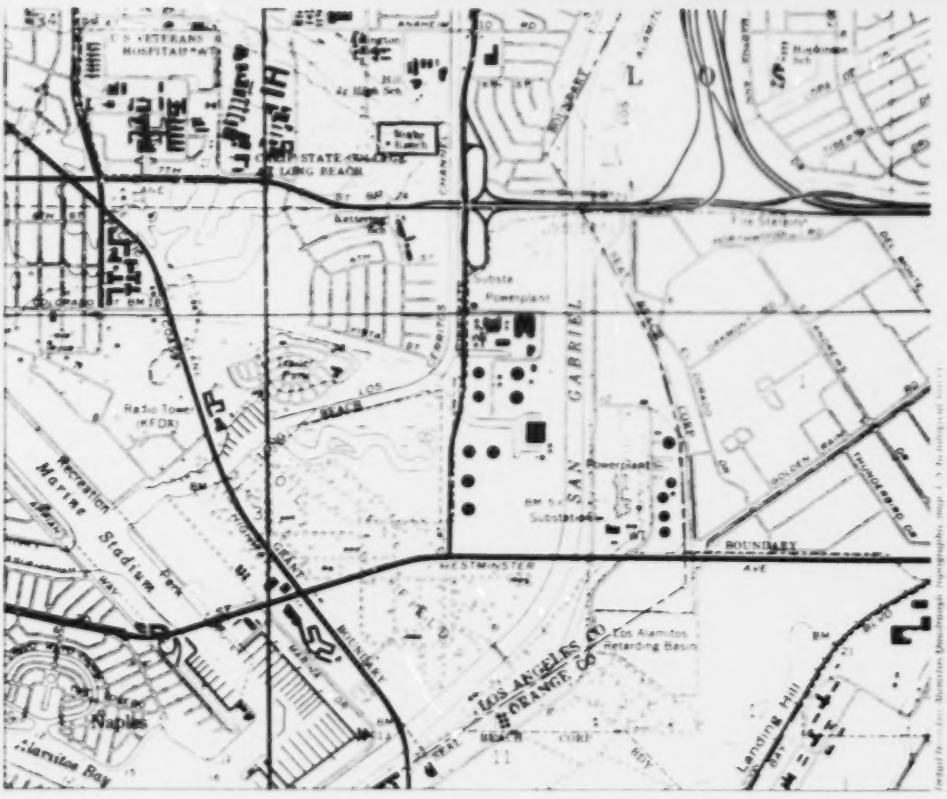
Map Exhibit 1.

Southern Los Angeles area, showing early land grants



Map Exhibit 2.

Los Angeles area



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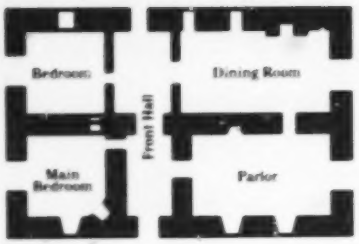
Plan 1.

Original Adobe



Plan 2.

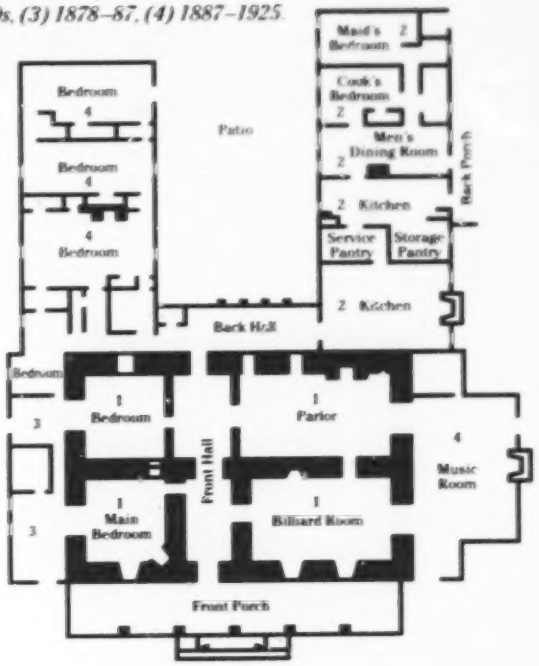
(1) Original Adobe plus Additions, (2) 1850s.

Plan 3.

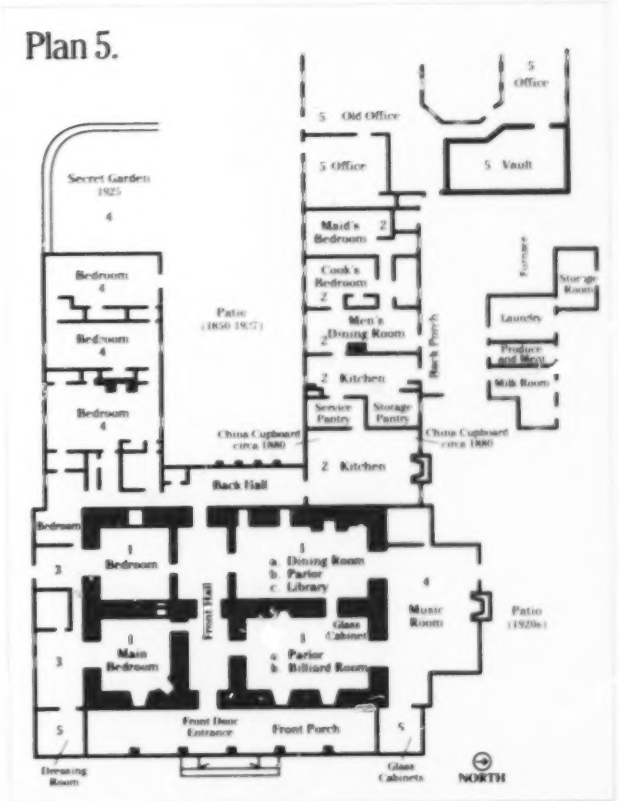
(1) Original Adobe plus Additions, (2) 1850s, (3) 1878–87.

Plan 4.

(1) Original Adobe plus Additions, (2) 1850s, (3) 1878–87, (4) 1887–1925.

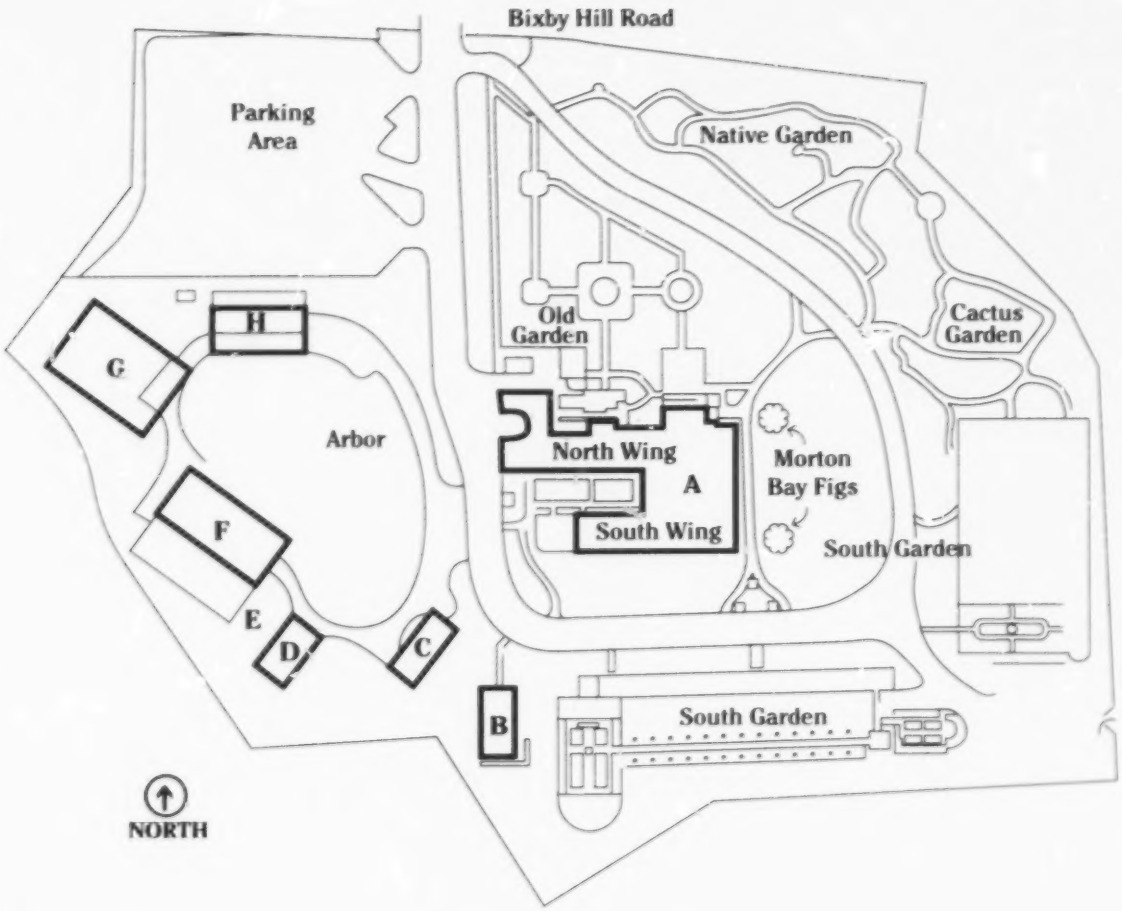


Plan 5.



Rancho Los Alamitos sequence of construction: (1) Original Adobe, plus Additions; (2) 1850s; (3) 1878–87; (4) 1887–1925;

Illustration 1.



Rancho Los Alamitos Site Plan. (A) Bixby Residence and Office; (B) Foreman's House; (C) Milking Barn; (D) Blacksmith's Shop; (E) Chuck Wagon; (F) Feed Barn; (G) Stallion Barn; (H) Horse Barn.

Reading 1: The History of Rancho Los Alamitos

Rancho Los Alamitos is one of the few sites remaining that represent the growth of Southern California from the time of its first occupation by Europeans. The ranch house itself has grown from a four-room adobe to an eighteen-room structure and serves today as an outstanding example of the way in which an existing Spanish-Mexican structure gradually developed into an eastern form adapted to the California lifestyle.

Rancho Los Alamitos was carved out of a land grant made by the king of Spain to Manuel Perez Nieto, a corporal in the Spanish army. At some time around 1800, Nieto built an adobe house which Jose Antonio Carrillo recalled visiting in 1806. When Mexican Governor Jose Figuero purchased the rancho in 1834, he added additional houses. No one is certain whether the surviving house grew from the adobes of 1806 or 1834.

Abel Stearns purchased Rancho Los Alamitos in 1842. Stearns was typical of the Americans who came to Southern California during both the Mexican and the American periods. He adopted some of the Californio ways of life, but put his own American stamp on others. Stearns, like later owners of the rancho, came from the East. He became a large landowner and cattle rancher and helped to change the economic life of Southern California. As a trader who settled in Los Angeles, Stearns became one of the city's wealthiest citizens, and served as the first *alcalde* (mayor) during the Mexican period and president of Los Angeles under American rule. He increased the traditional Spanish-Mexican cattle-raising operation of Rancho Los Alamitos and added to the house by building a north wing of wood-frame construction, positioned at right angles to the original adobe.

In 1861 Stearns mortgaged the rancho to Michael Reese, who purchased it at a sheriff's sale five years later. A Bavarian, Reese settled in San Francisco in 1850 and purchased large tracts of land vacated by the exodus to the gold fields. By 1878, when Reese died while on a trip to his homeland, his estate was worth more than $6 million. He never lived at Rancho Los Alamitos, but leased it for stock grazing.

In 1878 John Bixby leased the ranch and began what was to be a 90-year occupation of Rancho Los Alamitos by the Bixby family. By the early 20th century, this family would be one of the largest landowners in the Los Angeles area. John Bixby had traveled from his native state of Maine to California to supervise the sheep-raising operation of his cousin Jotham Bixby's Rancho Los Cerritos. During the Civil War, cotton was replaced by wool, hence the profitability and importance of raising sheep to the newly created state. In 1881 John Bixby purchased Rancho Los Alamitos in partnership with his brother and I. W. Hellman. To make the adobe more livable for his wife and young child, Bixby added many improvements before he died in 1887. The ranch was then divided into three parts; his wife received the middle section, which included the ranch house, the barns, and the corrals. By 1915 Rancho Los Alamitos was described in the following way:

> *One of the most beautiful in this section, the buildings being located on the heights overlooking the mountains, the valleys and the sea, an ideal spot for a home, the land extending six miles along the coast and being in itself a small principality. The old adobe house that was built over 100 years ago with walls from three and a half to four feet in thickness, has been improved and modernized, and yet retains the appearance and necessarily its historical interest that clings to the days when the Spanish dons reigned supreme. The other buildings of the ranch are large and in keeping with the progressive spirit of the owner.* *

By 1915, Rancho Los Alamitos was commonly referred to as the Bixby Ranch. In 1968, the ranch was granted to the city of Long Beach by the surviving trustees of the Bixby Home Property Trust.

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*A History of California and an Extended History of Los Angeles and Environs, *vol. 3 (Los Angeles: Historical Records Co., 1915), p. 540.*

This reading was adapted from the National Register of Historic Places registration form "Rancho Los Alamitos," prepared by Nancy J. Sanquist, Bixby Ranch Company, 1981.

Reading 2: The Construction of Rancho Los Alamitos

The ranch house is constructed in a **U**-shaped plan that has evolved over approximately 175 years. At the base of the **U** is the original, early 19th-century adobe structure now sheathed in stucco. This oldest section consists of four single rooms off a central hall built upon foundations presumed to be field stones laid in adobe mortar. A screened porch was added, consisting of eight bays constructed upon a brick foundation; it extends across the front of the adobe. The north wing of seven rooms was the first major addition. It was constructed on a brick foundation around 1850. This service wing, sheathed in rough board and regularly pierced by tall, narrow windows, had walls of one-inch board covered with painted plasterboard. In the years between 1878 and 1887, the adobe was extended to the south with another wooden addition. In 1925 a second story of stucco-over-frame construction was added to the original adobe. A four-bay open porch with a simple stick railing was added on the west side of this second story. The result imparts a flavor of Monterey construction to the entire building. (The Monterey, California, style typically featured pitched roofs, while most other Spanish-Mexican architecture in America had flat roofs.)

Adobe is the Spanish name for bricks made of mud that have been dried in the sun. They are usually fairly large in size, averaging a foot wide, 6 or so inches thick, and 13 to 18 inches long. Sun-dried bricks have been used for construction in various parts of the world since the beginnings of civilization. When the Spanish arrived in the Americas they found the Indians of Mexico and the Southwest using these adobe bricks.

An important building material for settlers in California and the Southwest, adobe brick literally could be made from the soil on which a building was erected. All that was needed was a clay soil with a small amount of sand or loam in it, or to which one of the latter could be added. Water was mixed with the soil (the Indians and settlers usually did the mixing with their feet), and straw was often added to protect against breaking. The resulting mud was then poured into wooden molds, and the bricks left to dry in the sun. The brick walls of a completed building would be covered with adobe mud plaster. When this coat was dry, it would be covered with a lime-based plaster. Apart from the ease of finding and making this building material, adobe was popular with the Spanish and American settlers because of the superb insulation it provided against both heat and cold.

The Spanish used adobe bricks to build most of their missions and other early buildings throughout California, the Southwest, and much of Mexico. These early houses have come to be referred to as *adobes*, usually with the name of the owner or the ranch attached—as in the Los Alamitos adobe.

This reading was adapted from the National Register of Historic Places registration form "Rancho Los Alamitos," prepared by Nancy J. Sanquist, Bixby Ranch Company, 1981.

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Photographs *(page 1 of 2)*

Photo 1. Los Alamitos, 1936.

Photo 2. Front entrance to Rancho Los Alamitos.

Photo 3. The window on the far left is recessed, showing how thick the adobe walls are. What do the furnishings of this room tell you about the family that lived here?

Photo 4. Which additions to the house are shown here? The second story with its two gabled and shingled dormers was not added until 1925 (see Photo 2). The porch attached to the rear of the second-story addition is typical of early American influence on California building styles.

Photo 5. Which buildings appear in this photo? Why might the skylight have been added?

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Photographs *(page 2 of 2)*

Frank Boland

Photo 6. Why do you think this area was called the "Secret Garden?"

Frank Boland

Photo 7. What area does this hedge enclose? Why would privacy in this area be considered important?

Frank Boland

Photo 8. The Bixbys bred Shire draft horses at Rancho Los Alamitos. Which of these buildings is the stallion barn and which is the horse barn?

Photo 9. Why was a chuck wagon necessary to a working cattle ranch?

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